12/15/87

'Apartheid,' a History Since 1652, in 5 Parts

By JOHN CORRY

"APARTHEID" opens with waves crashing on a beach. The sound is like gunfire. For just an instant, it seems the "Frontline" series will be a recital only about violence. It is not; "Apartheid," which begins on Channel 13 at 10 o'clock tonight, is a serious attempt to explore history. South Africa's racial policies are separated strand by strand. As television, this is not always gripping, but as a tool for understanding, it is superb.

The five-part series moves chronologically. Tonight's program touches on the Dutch arrival at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, moves a century or so forward and fastens on the so-called Battle of Blood River in 1838: a handful of Boer trekkers defeated thousands of Zulu warriors. More important, an Afrikaner myth was born.

The myth, the series says, began to shape South Africa in the 1930's. Old newsreel film shows Boer descendants re-enacting "the great trek." Political-religious fervor swept up Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans. The semisecret, semifascist Broederbond was formed. ("We were waiting for Hitler to come," a former member says about World World II.) In 1948, Broederbond adherents won the national election.

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Thus, apartheid — the classification and complete separation of people by race — had a new overwhelming weight behind it. The series uses old film and pictures and interviews with white and black South Africans to tell a complex story. "Frontline" claims to be presenting a definitive television history, and it is just possible it is.

The series — the first four programs are produced by Britain's Granada Television and the fifth by Irv Drasnin for "Frontline" — gives us a feeling for South African contradictions.

Until the 1940's, say, "racial problems" in South Africa referred only to the enmity between Afrikaans and English-speaking South Africans, rather as if the majority black population did not exist. In a way, the opening part of the series reflects this; it has to. The white political figures left a more visible record.

The series, for example, presents film of Jan Christiaan Smuts and J. B. M. Hertzog, who led South Africa, both as rivals and as colleagues, through much of this century. The founding of the African National Congress in 1912, however, is mostly told through old photographs and recollections.

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Viewers will have to work at some of this; black and white South Africans speak in a variety of accents. The work, though, is worth it. We get a feeling for what seem to be inevitable forces of history. Apartheid does-1948 was a cruel fraud, certain to end in disaster.

As frequently happens now, the public-television series and a hardcover book — "Apartheid: A History" by Brian Lapping, the executive producer for Granada — are appearing simultaneously. The book, of course, is more detailed; the series is sometimes discursive. It is also the most intelligent and sweeping look at South Africa we will probably ever get on television. Judy Woodruff, the "Frontline" host, opens and closes each program with pertinent commentary.

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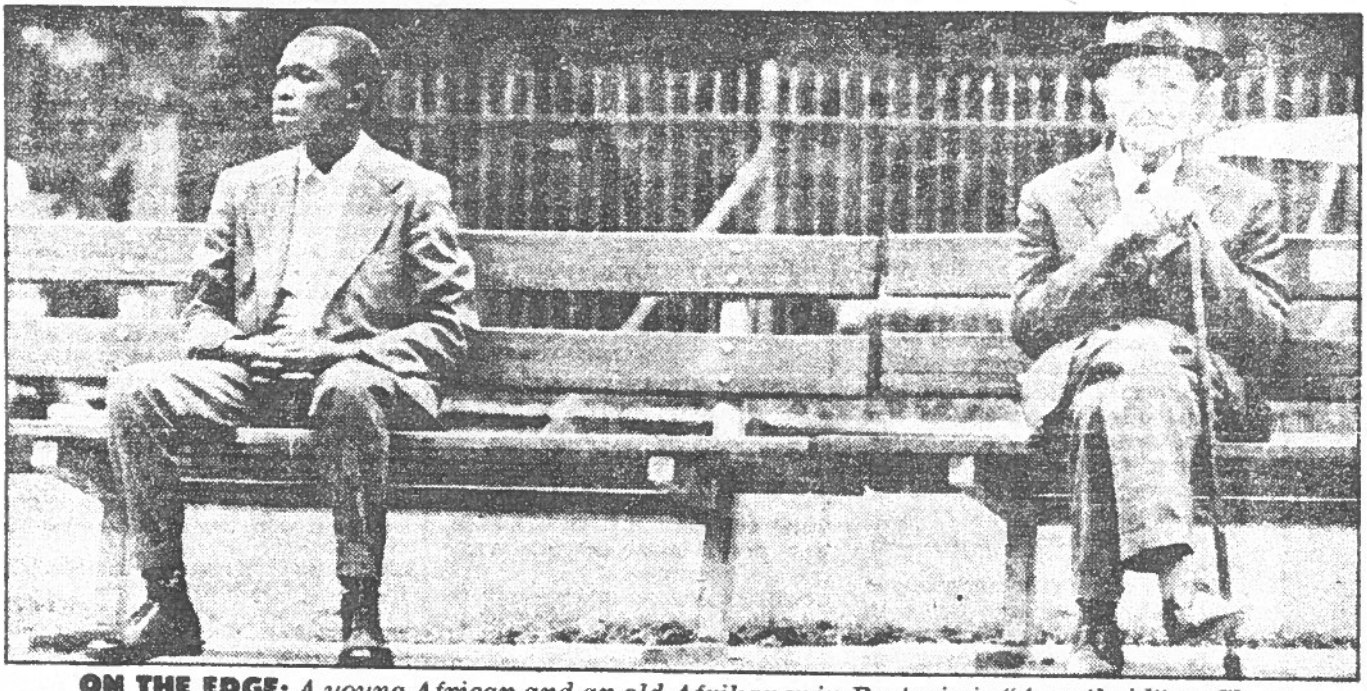

ON THE EDGE: *A young African and an old Afrikaner in Pretoria in "Apartheid" on Ch. 13.*

"Frontline" is presenting a special five-part program on, and called, "Apartheid." The reasons for showing it should be clear to anyone who watches — and everyone should.

The South African government will likely be uncomfortable with "Apartheid," for much of the material in it was gathered in 1985 and 1986 despite severe media censorship.

BY DAVID BIANCULLI

The first hour begins at the beginning, by carbon-dating artifacts from native black Africans and proving scientifically that black African culture dates back to the Fifth Century A.D. Afterward, that finding is compared to the official South African history books, which claim that the country was first inhabited by whites.

The Boer War, in which the white Afrikaners were killed or imprisoned in concentration camps by the then-reigning British government, is recounted in vivid detail. That's understandable, because by the end of "Apartheid," the racial struggles of Africa and the key to the white Afrikaners can be traced to that 1890s battle.

Part II (segments are shown weekly) picks up events after WWII, and traces the rise of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko.

It also includes some extraordinary footage. A state police truck is shown driving through the streets, with the officers in the back of the truck pointing out unarmed black civilians, aiming their rifles and firing as if they were skeet shooting.

"Frontline: Apartheid,"
Tomorrow night at 10, Ch. 13
★ ★ ★ ½

The images are extraordinary, and revolting, because they're photographed from within the truck, from the snipers' point of view. That the police would think nothing about shooting down helpless blacks as a camera recorded everything silently speaks volumes about the depth of racism evident in parts of South Africa.

Though the history of "Apartheid" is shameful, the concluding hour ends the documentary series on a surprisingly optimistic note.

The first four hours, imported by Granada TV, do for apartheid what "Eyes on the Prize" does for the civil rights movement. They bring an incredible amount of video and film footage — and understanding — to a complex, crucial issue.

And as good as those first four hours are, the finale — produced especially for "Frontline" — is even better. It attends the July 1987 summit, the first of its kind, between representatives of the outlawed African National Congress and dissident white Afrikaners.

The meetings, like the ANC, were outlawed, but "Frontline" was there.

The entire hour is brilliant — but it gains power because the preceding four hours have fully explained the issues and tensions dominating the illegal (but inspirational) summit.

This documentary is an example of how people from different cultures, working together, can contribute to the betterment of all.

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